Interviewer: This is all right, yeah?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Good.

[Side conversation]

Well, thank you very much, first of all, for doing this. So, for starters, what were you doing in 1978, when Marion Barry was running for mayor?

Interviewee: Well, I was kind of on the frontend of my career. I was the then executive director of the Association for Retarded Citizens, and working very hard to try to change outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities. Which, of course, is now the accepted term; before, people used to be referred to as having mental retardation. And we were working hard to start to get closed down a place called Forest Haven, which was an institution where people with intellectual disabilities. And trying to begin to expand community services for people with intellectual disabilities. Which wasn't all that widely accepted, at that point, and it was a very interesting time, politically.

Walter Washington had been the mayor, and it was a bruising race that had occurred. I was not directly involved in it myself, but how could you not pay close attention to such a competitive race. You had Walter Washington who was running for re-election, you had Sterling Tucker who was the chair of the council of the District of Columbia. And then, of course, Marion Barry, who ultimately prevailed in a very close race. In fact, I think all three of them got somewhere in the 30s, in terms of percentage.

Interviewer: Yeah, Barry beat Sterling Tucker by about 1,300 votes, and less than 3,000 over Walter Washington.

Interviewee: Wow, that was obviously very close. You know, it was a very competitive race, and I think it demonstrated to people, you know, how brilliant, how astute, and how competitive Marion Barry himself was at the time. And then, of course, he went on to do many positive things for the District of Columbia, and, you know, he should be remembered mightily for those things, rather than some of the other things that people remember him for.

Interviewer: Now, he was very much an activist, for many years, before coming to Washington, and for several years afterwards. So, I mean, what kind of memories do you have from those times, like, the late-'60s?

Interviewee: Well, you know, I knew his involvement with Pride Incorporated, I knew his involvement with the Board of Education. He became the president of the Board of Education, and so many people then acquired a tremendous respect for his financial acumen, his budget acumen, when he was president of the Board of Education. I remember Hilda Mason, who was a council member for many years in the District of Columbia, telling me that she was on the Board of Education with him. And that he wanted to be the president of the Board of Education, and she insisted, along with others, that he had to learn the budget, he had to know the budget. And she told me that he was absolutely phenomenal in terms of his grasp of the financial details, and demonstrated to people that he was absolutely the right choice to be the president of the Board of Education, at the time. He then moved from being Board of Education to being a council member when home rule came to the city.

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean, as I think we all know, he was a dissertation short of a Ph.D. in chemistry. He had a very sharp mind, especially for numbers, it seems like.

Interviewee: Well, he absolutely did, and even, you know, when he was mayor, he would spend time going and teaching a class in chemistry, 'cause that's what his field was, was chemistry, at I think Ballou High School, or Anacostia High School, or both of them. And it kept him in touch with his field, it kept him in touch with children, you know, which was one of his big loves, also. And gave him things to do that were in addition to his work as a mayor of the District of Columbia. And of course, before that, as an at-large council member for the entire city.

Interviewer: It seems like – and he said it several times – the civil rights work that he did gave him that sort of grassroots activism background, which was really important. You know, when you're running against an incumbent mayor and the chairman of the council, you gotta do something different to leap over those guys. So, you know, you need to do something different, and it feels like that's the kind of campaign he ran, would you say so?

Interviewee: Well, I think that's absolutely correct, I think his activism grounded him in the things that he really was close to, things that mattered to him. I spent many days talking to Marion Barry about

his political history and his political activism, and learned a lot from him in terms of connecting with people. I, too, love to work with people, I love to be around people, I love to do things with people, and it was clear that that was one of the most important things to him. That is, to be able to do things that help to get people to a better place. He worked very hard, and I think it just came naturally to him to work with people here in the District of Columbia.

He very much supported the underdog, you know, the person who was on the downside, if you will, of life, and he was always doing something that would try to uplift people. I mean, you look at the summer youth employment program, which is one of his signature programs, and I asked him, once, I said, "Well, Marion, why did you do that?" Do you know what he said? "When I was growing up – " and I guess he grew up in Memphis and other cities in the South – he said that, "there was no opportunity for me to have a summer job." He said, "I used to go out and collect newspapers and cans and bottles, you know, and turn them in, and be able to get whatever I could off of that." And he said, "I vowed that if I ever had the chance to do it, I was gonna make sure that every child who wanted one would have a summer youth employment, you know, opportunity, a summer job."

And it's amazing the number of people in this city who say, "I got my first job because of Marion Barry." So many people remember him because of that, and it's well-founded, it's well-deserved that he's remembered in that way.

Interviewer: And it seems like that kind of grassroots support was very helpful to him later on, when he needed to weather some storms, yeah?

Interviewee: Well, absolutely, people loved Marion Barry and they always considered him somebody who really cared about the people. That he was for the people, he was about the people, and that what he did was to try to help people get to a better place. I know that from my own personal experience with him. You know, as the executive director of the ARC, of the Association for Retarded Citizens, I reached out to him, once he became the mayor, to try to get him involved with the issue. And he really was quite supportive. He actually agreed to be the honorary membership chair for the ARC.

And we did some advertisements with him, and you could see his heart was in it. He knew that these were people who needed to be uplifted, they deserved to be uplifted, and worked very closely with him. Over time, we got Forest Haven closed, and, you know,

it was not without his support. His support was tremendous in being able to help us get there; there were some very difficult times in trying to make that happen. I well remember going to a meeting, one night, where he was speaking in Ward Four of the city, and people had asked him to come because there was somebody who had kind of orchestrated this whole meeting for him.

And there must've been 200 people in the room, and a very small number of people who were there as supporters. And he spoke and talked about why this was an important thing to do, and this man kept badgering him, badgering him, and questioning him, and asking him one question after the other. And finally, he looked at the person and he said, "You know what, you don't really want any answers, do you?" He said, "If you wanna talk about how we make this better, I will be happy to stay here all night. Otherwise, I have nothing else to say to you." You could hear a pin drop after that.

It absolutely shut down the conversation in the room. And it demonstrated, once again, how much he cared about people, and how he was willing to stand up for those who, you know, may not have had the wherewithal themselves to make that happen.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what you remember, specifically, about the 1978 campaign?

Interviewee: Well, I just remember it was a bruising campaign; it was very competitive. I, you know, again, was not actively involved in the campaign. Working for a nonprofit organization, it was important to be, you know, [moved] from that as much as you possibly could. But as a native Washingtonian, as a citizen of the city, I couldn't help but pay close attention to what was happening. And again, I watched him, you know, competing against a sitting mayor, competing against a council chair, both of whom were well-known in the city. And it wasn't that Marion Barry wasn't well-known; he just wasn't as well-known as those people.

And I watched him demonstrate his acumen, his understanding, his commitment, his involvement, you know, with so many issues in the District of Columbia. And so, it wasn't a shock to me when he won, because he had demonstrated, by that time, that he deeply cared about the people and he deeply cared about the city.

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean, it seems like it must've caused something of a sensation when he announced that he was gonna run, because he was, you know – yeah, he's taking on these two very connected and very experienced people, yeah.

Interviewee: Well, indeed, he did, and of course, the race for the council chair was up, as well, and I think, obviously, the mayor seat was up, and I think his own seat was up, so he was putting at risk – I think his seat was up as – maybe it wasn't. I think –

Interviewer: I think not.

Interviewee: No, I think not. I think the seat, the at large seat, was then won by [John Ray –]

Interviewer: Yeah, because he drew the short straw, in 1974, and he had to be up again in 1976.

Interviewee: Yeah, so he had won the seat again in '76.

Interviewer: And so, I guess he was good until 1980, yeah.

Interviewee: Yeah. So, he ran against two people whose seats were up. I think Arrington Dixon ran for council chair, and obviously Walter Washington ran to keep his own seat. And Marion Barry was not in, you know, a situation where he would've lost his seat on the council, had he lost the mayor's race. But I think he really wanted to do something else, at that point, that's my sense of it. And as I've talked to him over the year, my sense was he was ready for the next step. And he had ideas about, you know, what he thought should be the approaches to helping people in the District of Columbia.

You know, when you look at the outcome, given the number of votes that were cast for him and cast for the others, it wasn't that everybody embraced him. But he was successful in winning people over, in the years thereafter.

Interviewer: What were some of the things you specifically learned from him?

Interviewee: I think tenacity, 'cause I – and maybe that's something that brought he and I together. Because I was working on behalf of a cause, too, that wasn't all that popular. It wasn't that anybody had anything against it, necessarily, but they weren't necessarily committed to it. So, you know, learning how to stay with an issue, you know, learning to be as focused as you possibly can, to have no reservations about working on behalf of what you believe in, those were things that were important to him, and those were things that, you know, he and I talked a lot about, and what I appreciated in him.

Interviewer: Are you good?

[Side conversation]

One of the things I notice, as I'm going over and talking with people who were involved in the campaign, was how much support he got from white voters and from the gay community, which was a very new thing at the time.

Interviewee: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Did you see that? And how did that continue, over the years?

Interviewee: Well, I did see that, and, you know, what Marion was especially brilliant at was being able to bring together seemingly disparate, you know, groups. You know, he really got elected – a lot of people don't know this – he really got elected in substantial part because of the Ward Three vote, who turned out in large numbers. Because he was endorsed by the *Washington Post*, that resonated, you know, mightily with people who lived in Ward Three. The LGBT community was, you know, coming together as a political force, at that stage, and Marion was very involved with helping them to understand their political power, to build their political power. And I think he was always there, always there for them, and it was something that was mightily respected in the city.

So, he was very good at cobbling together, you know, groups that weren't necessarily naturally attracted to one another. The other thing that he was especially good at, too, is if you look at some of the people he attracted when he became the mayor people who came into his administration and were very, very talented people. You know, Elijah Rogers, who was a city administrator, was incredibly talented; still is, for that matter. Audrey Rowe, who was the commissioner of Social Services. Jim Gibson, who I just saw at a celebration, 40th celebration of the Center for the Study of Social Policy – he got an award, there. These were very talented people who saw the leadership qualities, they saw the prodigious intellect of Marion Barry, and wanted to be a part of what they saw as a way of creating a new day in the District of Columbia.

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean, he very much opened up and diversified the administration and the bureaucracy of the city *[crosstalk]* district, yeah.

Interviewee: Absolutely, *[crosstalk]*.

Interviewer: You know, I've been asking, I mean, I know that Marion Barry wasn't the first mayor after home rule, but he kind of was, in a way, wasn't he?

Interviewee: Well, he was, I mean, the mayor that preceded him, Walter Washington, is immensely respected, also. He was an appointed mayor, and then he became an elected mayor during home rule. And Walter Washington was highly respected for his ability to work with people, you know, on Capitol Hill. People who found it very hard to recognize and respect the autonomy, such as it was, such as it is, the people who lived in the District of Columbia. And so, he was somebody for whom I had enormous respect, as well, watching him work. He was somebody who, you know, we reached out to on behalf of issues affecting people with disabilities, and he was responsive.

But Marion Barry really is known – not as the first mayor, but he's known as the one who really stepped out and worked hard to be able to get as much autonomy for the District of Columbia as could be achieved. And not everybody respected that, you know, people – there still were people who saw the District of Columbia as a colony, a place that, you know, was under the thumb of the congress, and he was not that kind of person. He was gonna do everything he could to create autonomy for the people living in the city.

Interviewer: It seems like there were people living in the city who thought it was just fine to be a ward of congress or a colony of congress, yeah?

Interviewee: Well, there were, there were people who routinely went to the – on the Hill, they didn't seem to have the respect they should've had for the people of the District of Columbia, for our government, for our executive leadership, for our council leadership. And if they didn't like the decisions that had been made by the local leadership, they would routinely go on the Hill. And he railed against that, as did a lot of others like myself, railed against that. And that is, it's – we understand you don't like the decision, but this is our leadership, so we need to respect our leadership and make sure that we send a message to congress that we're not subservient.

Interviewer: Yeah, and I was gonna ask you some of the other concrete steps, too, I mean, just the very fact that he was mayor was a statement of independence.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: But, you know, what were some of the other steps, concrete steps that he took to assert that sort of independence?

Interviewee: Well, I think his history was a way of asserting it, the fact that he had opened, you know, this Pride organization that he had developed in the city, along with others, but it was really his idea. And, you know, his thinking, as best I understand it, was that he wanted to see that people would have a chance to be able to earn their way. That they would have the skills, that they would have the job opportunities that they needed to be able to earn a wage, and have a skillset that would earn them the respect and the opportunities that they deserved. He also saw, hugely saw, the importance of education to our children, that's why he became a part of the Board of Education. The many who have thought that his being a part of the Board of Education was just a political steppingstone to the next level, I don't think that's true.

It may have been, you know, somewhere in his mind, but what I saw was a man who appreciated the importance of education in the District of Columbia, to have a strong public education system in the city. And that he committed himself to doing that, being a part of the Board of Education. And of course, when he went to the council, he became the financial revenue chair, also. So he took his skillset that he had developed, you know, in the Board of Education, brought it to the council, became a tremendous expert on the budget and finance in the city. And really, those steps became another way of defining who Marion Barry was, in addition to his own tenacity and his own commitment to seeing that the city was treated with the respect that we deserve.

Interviewer: Yeah, I read a couple of his position papers, when he was chair of the finance committee, and, you know, he was arguing for independence at the same time that he was making a financial argument, as well, you could tell. The thing about –

Interviewee: I don't think he ever felt at all comfortable with us having to send our budget up to the Hill. And I appreciate that, 'cause I never felt comfortable with it, either: we shouldn't have to ask somebody for permission to spend our own money. And it's amazing to me the number of people who still today don't understand that we're not funded by the federal government. That, you know, the money we get from the federal government is, essentially, the same way that every other state gets money from the federal government.

Interviewer: One of the things about Pride, it wasn't just young people; it was people coming out of jail, it was people on probation, you know, it was people who were hard to reach. And you were taking a chance on a lot of these people, and some of them didn't come through but a lot of them did.

Interviewee: Well, it's true, and it's because he opened the door for'em. It's one of the reasons why so many people, you know, even today, even though he's gone, still talk so affectionately and supportively about Marion Barry. Because people felt like he was for them, that he was there to be able to make a difference in life that would benefit them, and he did that for many, many people. And he did it on an individual basis, for many people, also. You know, when you're the mayor of the District of Columbia – and I've been the mayor, of course – you know, you can easily get caught up, you know, in the magnitude of the job and the magnitude of the numbers. But one of the most important things is, one of the discussions he and I often engaged in was making sure you don't forget who people are, that you're there to be supportive of people.

And he always remembered their name. I'll never forget, when my son was, I don't know, seven or eight years old, he remembered my son's name, Carlos. I said, "That's incredible. That's phenomenal." And that was his middle name, that wasn't even his first name, but it's the name he went by. And it was another hallmark, another trait of Marion Barry, his ability to know people, to know the qualities of people, and to be able to acknowledge those things to people.

Interviewer: He, from what I'm reading, he also had an incredible head for phone numbers. He would always have a pocketful of quarters and dimes, and evidently, he couldn't pass by a phone booth, back when we had phone booths, without stopping and giving a couple of people phone calls.

Interviewee: *[Laughs]* It may be the case. I tell you what, he became just as accomplished with a cellphone, also: he was always calling somebody on his cell. And, you know, as mayor, I would pick up the phone and say, "There's Marion on the other end." *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: You know, I imagine that, you know, his legacy is kind of a – you know, it's complicated. I wouldn't say it was a mixed one even, but it was a complicated one. And it seems like in the end, you know, I mean, there were a lot of, you know, some of the people around him had problems as well as, you know, his own personal problems, which were on a different level than the problems of some of the people in his administration. And it seemed like some

of that is gonna happen in any administration in any city, but it seemed like the affection never wavered, I mean, even when there were problems like that.

Interviewee: No, it didn't waver. People were very committed to Marion, they worked very hard on his behalf, and they always felt like he had their back.

Interviewer: It seemed like, for example, in the '78 election, he did win Ward Three and had strong support, there. That diminished, over the years.

Interviewee: It did.

Interviewer: And, whereas, on the other hand, he did not win Ward – I don't think he won Ward Seven and I know he didn't win Ward Eight, which is where he actually ended up spending more than a decade representing.

Interviewee: Yep.

Interviewer: Do you what that slide, what that change in political support was about?

Interviewee: I think – and I can only speculate – I think that Marion saw that some of the things that he stood for, on behalf of people, would become less attractive to people in Ward Three, and would become more attractive to people on the east end of the city. Marion moved from, I think, southwest to Ward Seven. He owned a home right around on Suitland Road, for a very long time. I think it was his astute ability to see that eventually, from a political perspective, it was gonna be very difficult to retain people who may have voted for him but didn't necessarily support some of the directions that he was taking the city. And that the people where he moved, in fact, would be there for him.

And they, in fact, were, and at the very end, Marion was still the council member representing Ward Eight, when he died. And I think they would've voted for Marion forever.

Interviewer: I'm sure of that. Is there anything else you wanna add about your memories of him, especially in the early days, his campaigns *[crosstalk]*?

Interviewee: Well, he was a phenomenal force, he was a force of nature, in many respects, and a very bright, you know, brilliant man, who

deeply cared about people. He brought his activism into political life. And I think he was one of those civil rights leaders who recognized that, in order to make real change, he had to become a part of a system that he had been fighting against. And he converted himself from being, you know, outside working to effectuate change, to being somebody who was inside having the authority and the opportunity to make change. And he made a lot of change.

And that's why I think it's – it's important to remember Marion for who he really was. You know, so many people wanna define him for the foibles that he had as a human being. That's not really Marion. That wasn't him. What he did was to try to uplift people, to get them to a different place. And there's so many people, even today, that are at a better and different place because of the fact that he was a leader and that he lived.

Interviewer: Okay, well, thank you very much.

Interviewee: You're welcome.

Interviewer: I appreciate it.

Interviewee: Thank you.

[End of Audio]